The naked truth

"Behind the Red Door" explores the unfamiliar and often contradictory landscape of China's sexual revolution

Behind the Red Door: Sex in China
Richard Burger
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Sex in China is a story of contradictions. Many Chinese harbor traditional attitudes, frowning on serial dating and expecting a woman to be a virgin on her wedding night. Many Chinese homosexuals live closeted in unloving marriages, and sex education remains so inadequate that young adults often do not really understand how pregnancy occurs. According to a China Daily survey, more than 70% of callers to a Shanghai help line knew next to nothing about contraception.

Yet those who assume China to be a uniformly prudish place are quickly proven wrong. The country is also home to enthusiastic sex toy expositions and a thriving pornography industry. Family-friendly convenience stores unabashedly display vibrating cock rings next to the cash register, and countless "hair salons" turn on their pink lights at sunset.

Richard Burger gives readers a rare glimpse into how these seemingly conflicting phenomena have come to coexist in "Behind the Red Door: Sex in China." Burger, the author of the acclaimed China blog "Peking Duck," draws on historical Chinese texts, recent news stories and scientific studies to weave a fascinating and comprehensive portrait of sex in China, from sex education and homosexuality to prostitution and extramarital affairs. The book shows how history, philosophy and tradition have shaped China's own version of modernity, resulting in a sexual revolution that looks nothing like the West.

Not your typical history book

Sex in imperial China features prominently in the book, and Burger tackles the subject with an obvious relish. His references to ancient Daoist sex manuals, banned Qing Dynasty books and historical classics like "Dream of the Red Chamber" make these chapters among the strongest sections of the book.

Burger traces much of China's openness toward sex back to Daoism, a religion that he terms "resoundingly sex-friendly." Central to Daoism are the principles of harmony and balance between yin (female) and yang (male) forces. Daoists believed that men could obtain life-extending yin forces by controlling ejaculation and helping women to achieve sustained orgasms – a practice that likely resulted in some of the best sex in Chinese history.

Confucianism, a secular philosophy that foregrounds the family and filial piety, also left a clear mark on modern Chinese sexuality. Like Daoism, Confucianism viewed sex as an essential part of life. But for Confucius (551 – 479 BC), sex was always secondary to concerns about the family, and its main purpose was to produce heirs. Thus the philosophy condemned extramarital affairs but not concubines, who gave birth to children within the structure of the dynastic family.

Despite their seemingly enlightened attitude towards sex, neither philosophy viewed the sexes as equal; both advocated firm gender roles in which women were subservient to men. Unlike often puritanical Western religions, however, neither Confucianism nor Daoism ever taught that sex was a sin.

But a puritan streak did emerge in the late Song Dynasty (960 – 1279) and the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1367) in the form of Neo-Confucianism, which advocated monogamy within wedlock and the strict separation of men and women. Chastity came back into fashion under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) and then reached a height in Mao Zedong's efforts to cleanse China of Western "spiritual pollution."

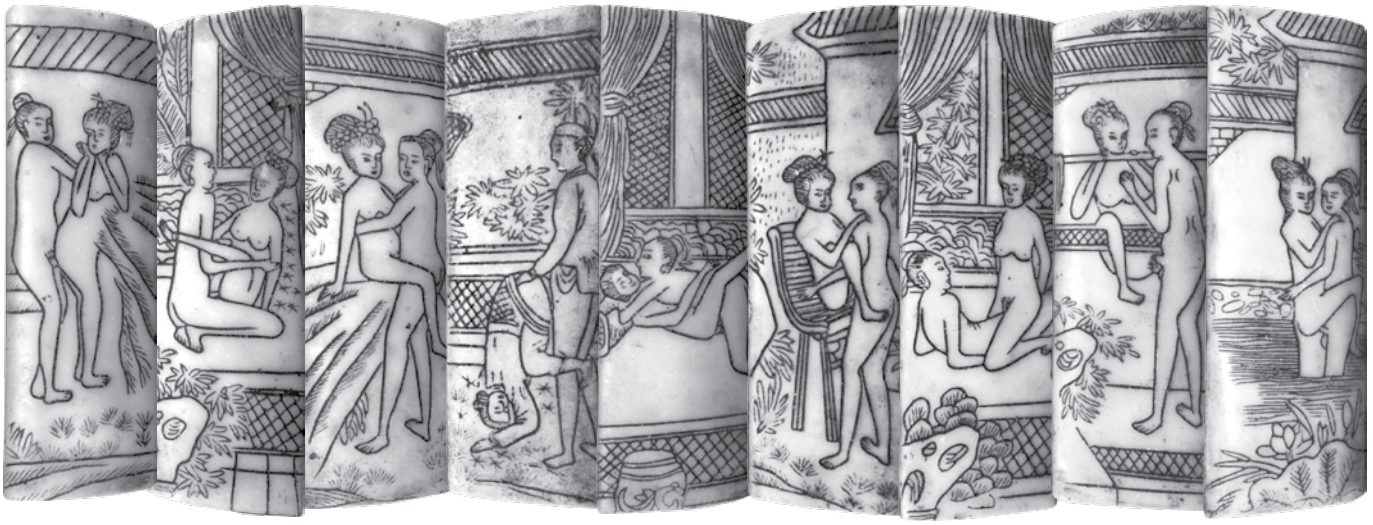
At least on paper, Mao's unending revolution eliminated prostitution, foot binding, polygamy, adultery and a swathe of gender- and sex-related social ills. The primary goal of Mao's harsh rejection of sexuality in favor of the androgynous worker was to weaken powerful Chinese family structures, which operated almost like clans and had a long history of undermining rulers.

"Mao was an idealist, and while he did want to elevate the status of women, the laws were also a tool for shifting power away from the family and strengthening the power of the state," Burger writes.

Mao's passing paved the way for Deng Xiaoping's capitalist reforms. Sex-related business, including pornography and prostitution, blossomed with China's new economic growth and opening.

Band of brothels

This account of Chinese sexual history helps explain away many of the country's seemingly



contradictory attitudes toward sex – for example, why prostitution is rife in China, even though Beijing adopts a far greater mandate than Western governments in the moral protection of its citizens.

The book argues that Chinese are relatively accepting of the world's oldest profession and male dalliances outside of marriage because of their long history of both prostitution and male dominance. Prostitution thrived throughout much of Chinese history and reached a peak in the Tang Dynasty, when it was institutionalized and taxed to support the state. It plays as large a role today, socially and economically, as it has for thousands of years, Burger writes.

Even so, the Chinese government periodically takes a heavy hand in "sweeping the yellow," or instituting crackdowns on the industry that include closing down prostitution rings and arresting customers and sex workers. Most of the time, however, these crackdowns are half-hearted efforts by officials to curry favor with their bosses, rather than consistent regulation.

According to Burger, local officials are reluctant to truly crack down on prostitution because it is an important source of revenue. Most sex experts estimate that China has roughly 6 million prostitutes who generate the stunning equivalent of 6-8% of GDP. An unknown amount of that cash goes toward greasing the palms of local officials.

"Behind the Red Door" offers first-hand accounts as evidence. In one interview, the owner of Japanese-style karaoke bars in Shanghai describes how he pays off local officials with free "hostess services" about twice a month, as well as cash bribes before the holidays.

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"There is plenty of irony here," Burger writes. "While China is blocking websites and railing against the spiritual pollution brought on by pornography … prostitution is just a karaoke bar away."

A glorious revolution

Sex in China is a naturally appealing topic, and "Behind the Red Door" is a quick and absorbing read. Some portions of the book are brutal, especially the chapters covering prostitution and human trafficking. But Burger's treatment of these subjects is factual and objective, and it is strengthened by revealing interviews.

Some chapters are stronger than others. Burger writes about Chinese history and more sensational topics with obvious enthusiasm. He gives a fascinating account of China's uniquely open attitude through history toward homosexuality. However, his chapters on modern trends, in particular attitudes toward dating and marriage, feel too perfunctory. The interviews are drier, and the writing seems labored.

The book paints a broad picture of sex in modern China, but it would benefit from a more detailed discussion of how the attitudes and behaviors of individual Chinese are changing. To describe China's supposed sexual revolution, for example, Burger tells the story of Mizumei, a 25-year-old female blogger who became an internet sensation by recounting dozens of graphic sexual exploits online. But although Muzimei captured the limelight, her dramatic story is hardly representative of the more subtle transformations and persistent barriers to change that average Chinese experience.

The book concludes that China's sexual revolution toward increased liberation and tolerance is underway. On the whole, however, this wonderfully comprehensive account inadvertently leaves the reader with a different impression. Its historical descriptions demonstrate that sex in China today is just as much about money and power as it was in the past, and that modernity has no monopoly on enlightenment.

As in the West, China's sexual revolution incorporates the pursuit of pleasure and personal freedom. But that is not the whole story. Even the most liberated young people in Beijing and Shanghai have a hard time escaping the high premium society places on a woman's virginity and the Confucian focus on filial piety, marriage and heirs.

Chinese attitudes toward sex are changing, yet they are, and perhaps always will be, bound by a different set of government regulations and cultural norms. As always in China, those who pick up "Behind the Red Door" expecting to have their preexisting views confirmed will be disappointed. ◆